Filming the Great War

By Ron van Dopperen

Filming war a hundred years ago was even more difficult and dangerous than it is today. Consider the risks. If a World War I cameraman wanted to shoot anything interesting he had to take his combat pictures from an exposed position. Visibility was severely restricted because of the nature of trench warfare. As a result, the cameraman had to get over the top, just like the soldiers, to capture his scene. There were no zoom lenses which could be used to close in on the action, and in order to crank the movie camera the operator needed to mount his equipment on a heavy tripod, which basically turned him into a prime target for enemy fire.

At the outbreak of the First World War film was a relatively new medium. If you look at the curious faces of the soldiers going into battle at the Western Front, smiling and waving at the camera, it reminds us of the novelty of film back then. Many people went to the picture show, but hardly no one had seen a movie camera. This also explains why cameramen at the front were frequently shot at. Mistaking the film camera for the latest type of artillery spotting device it did not take long before the enemy had the position of the cinematographer registered. If he did not find shelter quickly he would be soon be in for a nasty surprise.

Donald Thompson with Graflex camera, 1915

Given the conditions at the front and the primitive, bulky film equipment it is hardly surprising World War I footage has many static shots. Most of the scenes were taken behind the lines for a very good reason. To go into no man's land with a movie camera would be tantamount to suicide. Lighting conditions also provided the cinematographers with some serious problems. U.S. Marine Corps cameraman Leon H. Caverly in 1918 reported from France: "It is pitch dark here by three-thirty, and besides it rains and rains with the result that we are knee deep in mud spelled with a capital letter. If 'War is hell', as Sherman said, it should be fought in the tropics to carry out the proper idea of heat. Incidentally, lighting conditions would be greatly improved."

Despite of all these problems cameramen did cover the Great War and managed to record some historic events. The Americans in particular were quick to respond to the outbreak of war and were already sending cameramen to Europe when the German army crossed the border into Belgium. Freelance cameraman Donald C. Thompson accompanied the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force at Mons, then changed sides and went over to the German army. While dining with a group of German officers he was shelled by the British and wounded in the face. Thompson would remain a freelancer throughout the war, later filming with the French and the Russians. Edwin F. Weigle, staff photographer of the *Chicago Tribune*, first went to Berlin, but the German authorities would not allow him to go to the front, so he also decided to switch sides and filmed *On Belgian Battlefields*, a movie that was sponsored by the Belgian authorities. His film, now sadly lost, was a huge success in the United States. The movie also capitalized on the widespread feelings of sympathy with the fate of the Belgian people who had been brutally overrun by the German army.

Lt. Leon H. Caverly, official cinematographer U.S. Marine Corps in France, 1918

Belgium in 1914 was like Dodge City of the Old West. Trench warfare had not set in yet. Although cameras were considered the badge of a spy the military zone had not been completely barred from journalists. Basically any reporter could try to get a glimpse of what was happening. The American cameramen had a natural advantage at this early stage of the war because they represented a neutral country. This made it more easy for them to film the opening rounds of World War I. They could ask any of the belligerent countries for a permit and since both the Entente and the Central Powers wanted to stay friendly with the United States this put them in a perfect spot. World War I film coverage by the Americans was also stimulated by a new cross-media approach that became an important feature in war coverage. The American news companies soon discovered the commercial possibilities of reporting on the

European war in both print media and newsreels. As an example, the *Chicago Tribune* sent Weigle to Europe as their "star photographer" and extensively used his war films to advertise the newspaper he was working for. As a result, circulation of the *Chicago Tribune* increased significantly.

TODAY—
The First and Only Authentic
MOTION PICTURES OF
THE EUROPEAN WAR
Taken by Edwin F. Weigle, Staff Photographer of
The Chicago Tribune
THE WORLD'S GREATEST NEWSPAPER
Will Be Shown in Chicago for the First Time
The first motion pictures of ACTUAL FIGHTING in the great European War have been brought to Chicago—4 reels of sensational scenes of the Belgian Battlefields, showing The Burning of Aerschot, The Destruction of Termonde, The Battle of Alost, the Battle of Aerschot, The Flooding of Lierre and the Battle of Malines.
In securing these spectacular motion pictures, The Chicago Tribune has again demonstrated its enterprise. These are positively the FIRST and ONLY authentic motion pictures of ACTUAL FIGHTING on the Belgian Battlefields. Because of the Tribune's exclusive arrangement with the Belgian Government, these are the only genuine motion pictures taken in Belgium. The Belgian Red Cross receives 50% of the proceeds from these pictures. READ THIS
These remarkable motion pictures were taken by Edwin F. Weigle, Staff Photographer of The Chicago Tribune, who has just returned from Europe. They bring to you, in all the action of actual battle, the terrible scenes which were created in Belgium during September and October. They show the shooting up of Belgians, the systematic burning of villages, the destruction of property, the use of armored motor cars—ALL THE THRILLS OF GENUINE WARFARE
CONTRACT
Beginning TODAY, these motion pictures will be shown at the STUDEBAKER THEATRE daily from 11 A. M. to 11 P. M. Mr. Edwin F. Weigle will appear in person at each performance to tell of his experiences. This is your opportunity to see the War as it really existed and to hear from the lips of an eye-witness the truth of the European War.
This is an opportunity that you can't afford to miss, 4 reels of motion pictures that Major Funkhouser, of the Chicago Censor Board, pronounces "Grand Pictures—the only real war pictures shown so far. The others, exploited as authentic, simply have been movies." See the motion pictures Edwin Weigle, factory of the STUDEBAKER THEATRE, Michigan Blvd., near Van Buren St., beginning TODAY.
STUDEBAKER THEATRE All Seats 25c
11 a. m. to 11 p. m. Daily
International Motion Picture Co.
EXHIBITORS:

Advertisement "On Belgian Battlefields", *Chicago Tribune*, November 1914

American film cameramen were also very much active on the side of the Central Powers. One of the most successful war reporters with the Austro-German army was Albert K. Dawson. Born in Vincennes, Indiana, in 1885, Dawson worked for the American Correspondent Film Company. He shot film at the Western Front and during the attack on Russian Poland in the summer of 1915. Parts of his war diary have recently been retrieved, as well as footage that he took on the Eastern Front. The film company Dawson worked for was secretly financed by the German government, one of the earliest examples of the use of war films for foreign propaganda. Wilbur Durborough also accompanied the Central Powers on a film assignment. His remarkable movie *On the Firing Line with the Germans* (1915) was sponsored by the *Chicago Daily News* and can now be watched again in its original release, thanks to a recent restoration project by the Library of Congress.

Press tycoon William Randolph Hearst also sent film cameramen to Europe. Admittedly pro-German, Hearst had cinematographers working on both sides of the war. Ariel Varges covered the war in the Balkans with the Serbian army and the British, while his colleagues Ansel Wallace and Nelson Edwards went to Germany. Wallace was the first cameraman to film the new, super-submarines the German Navy deployed in the British Channel. He secretly filmed these scenes in 1915 while the Dutch ship he was on was captured by the Germans. Nelson Edwards was the first foreign cameraman to film the Turkish side of the war, as well as the aftermath of the Battle of Jutland (1916).

As the Hearst press and *Chicago Tribune* found out, sending your own cameraman to Europe was a terrific way to boost business and report on the war in a new, revolutionary way. The cross-over between newspaper and film in fact came quite

easily. The first American newsreel - *Universal Animated Weekly* - had started production in 1914. Using motion pictures to circulate news was the latest thing. It also tied in with the contemporary rise of rotogravure pictorial editions in all of the major American newspapers. It is hardly surprising therefore these American reporters who covered the Great War used both still and movie cameras. Most of them started working as press photographers.

German soldiers taking cover during a sniper attack. Scene from *On the Firing Line with the Germans* (USA, 1915)

When America entered World War I the U.S. Signal Corps was assigned to cover the operations of the American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.). Like France and Britain, a strict censorship was established and no cameraman was allowed to film the war unless he wore a military uniform. From 1915, when the French established a military film department, the European authorities had begun to tighten control over film coverage at the front. The U.S. Army in July 1917 on the same basis set up a photographic division. Soldiers were trained in the art of war photography at Columbia University in New York City.

At the end of the war these Photographic Units which were sent to France had become a remarkable powerhouse. When the Armistice was signed seven field units were on duty on the Western Front, having produced more than 600,000 feet of film. Most of this footage is still in perfect condition and has been filed at the National

Archives in Washington, D.C.. These military pictures cover all major A.E.F. campaigns and provide us with a unique pictorial record of America's involvement in World War I. These official pictures were also used extensively by the Committee on Public Information, America's propaganda agency, which distributed four feature documentary films, as part of massive publicity drives, as well as numerous shorts and an official war newsreel for the American film theaters.

Thanks to the invaluable work by these pioneering cameramen film had come a long way during World War I. Compared to the early days of the Nickelodeon movies in 1918 had reached adulthood.

Ron van Dopperen studied history at the University of Utrecht (Holland) where he wrote his Master of Arts Thesis on the American World War I documentary films. He is co-author together with Cooper C. Graham of *Shooting the Great War: Albert Dawson and the American Correspondent Film Company* (2013) and together with Jim Castellan and Cooper Graham of *American Cinematographers in the Great War* (2014).

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